Programming to Pair Younger and Older Generations Brings Meaningful Connections

DAVID LEWELLEN
Contributor to *Health Progress*

Two high chairs stand next to an assortment of wheelchairs and walkers in the corner of the dining room at Trinity Woods. Mealtimes for the independent living residents at the facility, located on Mount Mary University's campus in Milwaukee, are often shared with the school's students, and some of the apartments are reserved for single mothers of young children.

"We love the little people running around," said Sr. Martha Waligora, SSND, who has lived in the facility since it opened. "We give them power; they give us power. You can't feel old in here, because so much is going on."

Trinity Woods, which opened in 2021, is a collaboration among Trinity Senior Services, a long-established management company that operates Catholic long-term care facilities; Mount Mary University; and the School Sisters of Notre Dame.[1] Under one roof, the facility offers 90 independent living units; 54 assisted living units for aging sisters; 24 units of student housing; and a separately owned day care center that serves the community. It was designed from the ground up to meet the needs of aging populations, students and children, and it represents a hopeful new trend in housing policy.

ENDING ARTIFICIAL SEGREGATION

The somber atmosphere of many senior living centers may result from the monoculture of age, in which young faces and outlooks are rare. But many programs are seeking to put the generations back together, whether through innovative living arrangements or pairing older and younger people for social activities. In either case, participants talk about the resulting sense of social connection and meaning in their lives.

"We've artificially segregated generations for years," said Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.[2] "When we plan facilities, they're stratified by age — school is for kids, senior centers are for seniors only."

Shannon Jarrott, PhD, a professor of social work at Ohio State University, agreed that silos of funding and agencies keep the thinking separate, such as separate programs to provide meals for low-income students and low-income seniors.

At the level of national policy, "we wish change was quicker," Butts said. "We have an aging population, and it's not just about the last year of life anymore." But she has noticed that new housing policies are tilting in favor of building "not a teen center and a (separate) senior center, but a community center."

In the case of Trinity Senior Services, "we were blessed," said CEO David Fulcher. "There was an opportunity and adjacent land, and we ran with it." The biggest obstacle to such facilities, he said, is finding land directly beside a

university or other institution that's oriented to younger people. But developers who are creating major new town centers from scratch have an opportunity to include senior housing as a natural part of the greater whole. "It's meaningful, purposeful, natural interaction," he said.

At Trinity Woods, the collaborations extend in many directions. Residents can audit courses for free at the university, and students come in to offer art therapy. The children at the day care center visit twice a month for "book nook," pairing elders and kids for read-aloud time, and most major holidays feature a children's parade through the retirement center's hallways. "We call it, 'Let's go and wave hi to the grandmas and grandpas,'" said Jenele Baldwin, director of the day care center, "and they [the children] love it."

For people who want social connection without moving, programs to put the generations back together need some structure. Butts said that once a week seems to work well, and so does a shared purpose, such as music, crafts or service projects. A one-shot visit to a nursing home could be "more harmful than helpful, if it's not done well," she said. "If kids see wheelchairs, smell things they haven't smelled before, it can be terrifying." But in regular visits with advanced preparation, young children become accustomed to disability in general and learn to process death as part of life.

'PRESCRIPTION FOR PURPOSE'

Pairing one older person and one younger person is a best practice. Ohio State's Jarrott said, "If you want to build relationships, you have to give people a chance to get to know each other."

Jarrott has seen many programs falter or die because one person left or because funding dried up. But if intergenerational connection is explicitly part of the group's mission, then new hires will know that they are not just a day care teacher or a retirement home activities director.

In the bigger picture, Butts said, everyone needs meaning and purpose in their lives, and older people are vulnerable to loneliness and isolation, whether in retirement homes or not. She talks wistfully about a "prescription for purpose," in which older people might also get a flyer with information about local intergenerational programs along with their medications. The recent surgeon general's report on loneliness identified older adults and young adults as the most isolated groups, and Butts said, "It only makes sense to connect those two generations."[3]

One program that tries to do just that is Perfect Pair, which matches long-term care residents with nearby college students.[4] Founded in 2020 at the University of Michigan, the program now includes 20 colleges and has an average of 20 matches per school.

"We wanted this to be mutually beneficial," said Kamryn Casey, the program's national director of community engagement. College students may be offering their matches a glimpse of the busy outside world, but they also need a different kind of connection themselves. "It's almost a grandparent-like figure," Casey said. "They'll ask for advice about roommates or classes. And the older people like to hear about their daily lives."

"There's an idea that older people need this more than young people do," Jarrott said — and that idea is wrong. Children and youths may be in the center of a village that is raising them, "but we know that more kids need a bigger village."

For Perfect Pair, older and younger generations who wish to be paired fill out a questionnaire, and the team matches them based on a shared interest. "Our student wait list is longer than our adult wait list," Casey said.

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— SHANNON JARROTT

Photo by Jodi Winship

Participants and volunteers at Richmond Aging and Engaging's East End site enjoy a game of balloon pickleball. The site is one of three low-income senior housing complexes in Richmond, Virginia, where the nonprofit takes college students to do intergenerational art and leisure and recreational programming.

ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS

Another program to link college students into the greater world is Opening Minds through Art (OMA), which encourages adults with dementia to create artwork. Since beginning at Miami University of Ohio in 2007, the program, which is headquartered at the university's Scripps Gerontology Center, has spread to about 300 locations, pairing college students (or other volunteers) with residents of local retirement homes.[5]

Noelle Naccarato, a senior at Miami University who is now on her fourth match, said she has learned to "talk like a human," resisting the impulse to speak too slowly and too loudly. "You have to be aware, but you also have to just be yourself."

Naccarato already has contact with the older generation through her grandparents, but it's a different feeling to interact with people who are meeting her as a young adult, without memories of her childhood. Her peers say that it has changed their attitude toward older adults and improved their communication skills.

"In nursing homes, people feel like they're care recipients," said OMA Assistant Director Krysta Peterson. "There's always someone telling them what to do, shuttling them around, saying, 'it's time to get up,' or 'it's time to eat.'" But in the art setting, "choices are built in. They choose their paint, they very much direct their art project."

In the bubble atmosphere of a college campus, meeting someone from a different age group has to be an intentional act. "If you're participating, you're already saying that you want to learn, and we train you to make the connection," Peterson said. "Lots of participants will say, 'I'm not an artist, I don't know how to do this.' Even facilitators will say, 'I do bingo.' But the art is there for the purpose of connection."

Among the many locations that have modified the OMA program for their location is Richmond

Aging and Engaging, a new nonprofit that brings college students into three low-income senior housing complexes in Virginia's capital. "A sense of purpose is important for health," said Executive Director Jodi Winship, PhD, "and we've found that people in this community don't have a lot of things to do."

Winship recruits students to visit the units every week, doing activities that the residents have chosen. One site likes physical activities, such as cornhole and "balloon pickleball." Another prefers crafts or board games.

Taking a break from academic work helps students' mental health, too, Winship said. And students from the medical or pharmacy schools are "practicing their interpersonal skills and learning about future patients," she said. "They can see why low-income patients can't follow doctors' instructions, or [they can see] the barriers of mental illness."

Students are told beforehand that "you may see bugs on the floor, or you may be partnered with someone whose child has been murdered," Winship said. "Don't freak out."

NEVER TOO OLD TO LEARN

Older adults need a reason to get out of bed every day, Winship said, and meeting a blood sugar goal may not feel like much of a reason. "But if they can learn something new or do something engaging with students and friends, that's a reason. They're competitive at balloon pickleball. They'll say, 'I'm going to beat Gloria this week.'"

Older adults who live on their own also have options to keep in touch with the younger generation. In Billings, Montana, St. Vincent Regional Hospital sponsors the AmeriCorps Foster Grandparent program, which recruits low-income adults ages 55 and up for placement in schools and Head Start programs to serve as classroom helpers.[6]

"They've raised their own children, and they want to help with the next generation," said Program Coordinator Lisa LaMere. "They don't do it for the $4 an hour stipend. They do it for the kids. None of them see it as work."

St. Vincent, and before it the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, has sponsored the federally funded program in the community since 1971. The health system offers benefits to participants, such as free flu shots. The social connections with both their peers and children give senior participants "a reason to pay attention to their health," LaMere said.

John Landry, who retired to Billings three years ago, has found fulfillment in a kindergarten classroom. "The kids call me Grandpa John," he said. "Last year's kids, who are in first grade now, they'll see me in the hall and come running up and hug me."

Landry is 60 and in his second year of working with a 23-year-old teacher, which has been another broadening experience. "I'm learning with the kindergartners how to do computers and iPads," he said.

And of course, not everything happens under a formal program. Butts, of Generations United, said that the kids on her cul-de-sac enjoy hanging out with her 70-year-old husband. "We encourage people to dabble their toe," she said. "Start with little things, and it will grow. Don't be overwhelmed by a program. It could just be checking on an older neighbor."

Ohio State's Jarrott added: "The potential of these programs is only limited by our imagination. We need people in all disciplines — design, urban planning, you name it. We need each other."

DAVID LEWELLEN is a freelance writer in Glendale, Wisconsin.

NOTES

1. "Trinity Woods — An Intergenerational Community," Trinity Senior Services, https://trinityseniorservices.org/trinity-woods/.
2. Generations United, https://www.gu.org.
3. "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf.
4. Perfect Pair, https://www.perfectpair.org.
5. Opening Minds Through Art, https://scrippsoma.org.
6. "St. Vincent Healthcare Foster Grandparent Program," United Way of Yellowstone County, https://uwyellowstone.galaxydigital.com/agency/detail/?agency_id=80353.